

The Contribution of Open Schooling



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Table. Expanding access - Universal Secondary
Education: The Contribution of Open Schooling*

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Abstract

Countries that have struggled to achieve Universal Primary Education will not be able to achieve Universal Secondary Education by building conventional schools. The sums simply do not add up to any remotely realistic budget scenario. To make progress governments must stop thinking of their role primarily as providers of secondary education and pay more attention to the facilitation and regulation of other providers. Private provision has an important role to play, not least in poorer communities, and open schools are an important option. The Commonwealth of Learning believes that open schools can not only expand access to quality secondary education very cost-effectively, but can also play a synergistic role in raising the quality of other providers by acting as a source of learning materials and a mechanism for introducing ICTs effectively for the secondary system as a whole.

Introduction: EFA – Failure and Success

Ministers and Distinguished Colleagues:

The EFA campaign has both failed and succeeded: it has failed because 75 million children still do not go to primary school. Dealing with the failure requires the training and retraining of millions of teachers. Conventional methods of teacher education cannot cope and the Commonwealth of Learning is helping countries use the well-proven methods of distance learning to increase the output.

But we can also celebrate success in getting children into school. As you all know, there were 40 million more children in primary school in 2006 than in 1998. But success poses a problem too. A tidal wave of youngsters is surging out of primary school and most have nowhere to go. Countries have the difficult challenge on continuing to push for Universal Primary Education (UPE), knowing that the children still out of school will be, for reasons of location and marginalisation, more difficult and expensive to reach than those already in school.

All this adds up to some scary numbers. To achieve a global secondary NER of even 80% would require

places to be found for some 200 million more youngsters. The number of inadequately educated young adults who need to pursue further learning is even larger. On one estimate there are 400 million children aged between 12 and 17 not attending secondary school. Greater still is the number of adult illiterates.

The problem for governments is that secondary education is more expensive than primary education. You will have your own figures for your countries, but one study estimated that secondary education costs about 3.5 times as much as primary and, as with primary, the cost increases as you get out of the cities and try to provide schools in the rural areas.

My fellow panellist Professor Keith Lewis is the world expert on schooling cost and he has shown that if your unit cost of secondary education is more than double that of primary education you will never achieve Universal Secondary Education. I suspect that for most of you Secondary does cost more than twice as much as Primary so there is a problem. You have to get the costs down!

The Commonwealth of Learning argues that many countries will barely scratch the surface of such numbers by trying to expand conventional schooling with the resources they have. Even before the global economic downturn they were not likely to get many more resources for education; but now they will be lucky to get any. Moreover, I find it hard to imagine that the international community will follow up the Fast-Track Initiative for UPE with a Fast- or even a Slow-Track Initiative for USE (Universal Secondary Education).

Is Open Schooling the Answer?

So what do countries do? COL believes that part of the answer lies in open schooling. What is open schooling?

It can be defined simply by the means that it uses: ‘it is the physical separation of the school-level learner from the teacher, and the use of unconventional teaching methodologies, and information and communications technologies to bridge the separation and provide the education and training’ (Phillips, 2006:9). This definition focuses on one important feature of open schooling: its use of distance learning.

There are many open schools around the world and some of them are very large. The open schools in India, Indonesia, and Mexico, for example, which I call mega-schools, each reach over one million students. If we define mega-schools as schools with over 10,000 students we find them in much smaller countries. Namibia has a population of two million and its open school, NAMCOL, with 28,000 students, accounts for over 40% of all secondary students in the country. Similarly the secondary programme of the Open College of the University of Papua, the Certificate of Tertiary and Community Studies, enrolls nearly 20,000 students.

One of the challenges of advocating open schools is that their activities have been much less researched and documented than you find for distance learning in higher education, such as the open universities.

However, this is changing. COL has published a book this month, *Open Schooling for the 21st Century*,

which reports research and evaluation on open schools in Botswana, Namibia, India, South Australia, Papua New Guinea and Canada.

Open Schools: Costs

A key point for this session today is that open schools can cost much less than conventional schools for equivalent results if designed to do so. I stress ‘if designed to do so’. Most of the open schools in the richer countries are simply designed to give students more flexibility or to reach students with disabilities. The latter is the case for the Open Access College of South Australia, which does not attempt to operate less expensively than the conventional schools.

However, a careful comparative study of the costs and effectiveness of the Indian open school, the National Institute for Open Schooling (NIOS), and NAMCOL, showed them to be very efficient.

NIOS has a cumulative enrolment of 1.5 million pupils over the last five years and enrolls another 350,000 annually. Unit costs are one twelfth (i.e. less than 10%) of those of the two conventional school systems to which they were compared. I should add that NIOS is also an apex body for the 16 state open schools that are development rapidly and enrol another 400,000 students.

Clearly it is easier to achieve economies of scale in a big country like India. However, open schools in smaller countries are efficient too. Although NAMCOL costs only slightly less per student than conventional systems at the Junior Certificate level, costs at the Senior Certificate level are only one-third those in the regular schools. A final example is the Open College of Papua New Guinea, where costs in the secondary programme are one half those of the conventional schools.

Moreover, and this is an important point for the future, the cost advantage of open schools, compared to regular schools, is increasing steadily because of their very different cost structures.

Open Schools: What for?

I have left until now the question: what are open schools for? Whom do they, or should they serve? There are three ways in which open schools can operate.

Complementary open schools

First is the complementary open school. This is an open school which enables children and young adults who cannot attend regular secondary schools for one reason or another to study the same secondary curriculum as the regular schools and to prepare for the same examinations, run by the same examination body, as the school system as a whole. NAMCOL in Namibia, and BOCODOL, in Botswana, are examples of complementary open schools.

Alternative open schools

Second is the alternative open school. Such schools recognise that they are dealing with a somewhat different clientele from the regular schools, usually older, often poorer and frequently disadvantaged in various ways. Alternative open schools try to address the needs of these students more directly with curricula that have a strong emphasis on vocational education or life skills for example. Obviously it is a requirement for such open schools to offer their own examinations and certification since the other examining bodies do not cater to such curricula. Examples are the Indian Open School, NIOS, and the Open College in Papua New Guinea.

Both these institutions have been successful in engaging young people with a more relevant curriculum with NIOS doing particularly well in engaging girls in its vocational curriculum.

Integrative open schools

Third, a notion is emerging of the integrative open school, which I believe could be a very important model for the 21st century. Here, instead of conceiving the open school as a peripheral institution that deals with youngsters that are hard to reach, it is placed at the centre of the school system. The reason for doing this is that because of their scale open schools could be a very important instrument for strengthening the whole school system and catalysing reform. This is important in two areas in particular.

First, good learning materials are in short supply in secondary schools in many developing countries. Indeed, for this reason materials from the open schools, where they exist, find their way into the conventional classrooms. It would be productive to formalise this phenomenon and give the open school a role at the centre of the curriculum development and reform process. This is facilitated today by the emergence of the phenomenon of Open Educational Resources, which are learning materials held in digital format that can be readily updated and adapted to meet particular circumstances.

This is already happening. COL is working with India, Namibia, Trinidad & Tobago, Lesotho and Seychelles to produce 20 sets of self-instructional materials on the secondary curriculum. Each set of material refers to the complete syllabus for one subject at Grade 10 or Grade 12 level in each of the five countries with the possibility of adapting it to the curriculum of any other country.

Closely related to curriculum is student assessment, again, given the scale on which they operate, and the flexibility that they offer, alternative open schools have to be very good at performing student assessment. At NIOS, for example, there is extensive use of question banks and the beginnings of a system of examinations on demand. Again, regular and reliable assessment is a key element of educational quality and an open school could help to improve assessment throughout the school system if given a mandate to do so.

Second open schools use technology. Their knowledge and experience could be very helpful to the regular school system as it grapples with the tricky question of introducing computers in the classroom. This, of course, relates back to my point about open educational resources. The conventional school system will not get very far with eLearning if each teacher has to develop eLearning materials from

scratch as a lone ranger or rely on packages from a far country with a different culture. Open schools could act as a central resource for developing good materials that can be used throughout the system.

Summary

There is much more to say but I shall stop there. Let me sum up. I have argued that many countries are never going to achieve universal secondary education by relying on traditional methods. All countries should therefore look at the potential of open schools to carry part of the load. These institutions can be designed to operate effectively, with quality, at a fraction the cost of regular schooling.

However, I have argued that open schools can do far more than mop up the hard-to-reach youngsters on the margins of the system. If an open school is fully integrated into the wider school system it can play a major role in improving the quality of the system as a whole by acting as a source of locally relevant and adaptable learning materials, by introducing better methods of student assessment, and by helping to ensure that introducing computers into the classroom adds value rather than simply adding costs.

COL is there to help you with open schooling. This area of our work is led by Frances Ferreira, former director of NAMCOL. COL can help you directly but also by putting you in a network of open schools. To facilitate this we are in the process of facilitating the creation of a Commonwealth Association of Open Schools. We are well aware of those that already exist but would like to hear from countries that are contemplating going in this direction so that you can get help and advice from peers.